INTERVIEW: [redacted]
Commanding Officer
NYPD Citywide Vandals Task Force
Apr 19[redacted] - Jul 20[redacted]

DISCLOSURE

For privacy reasons, the name and years of service of the interviewee have been redacted. Additionally, certain parts of the interview have been removed. While the integrity of the conversation has been maintained, some details have been omitted to protect privacy.

As of today, the full audio recording of this interview is not publicly available. However, in the coming years, it may be released in part or in full.

2:02

INTERVIEWER: Did working for Vandal Squad give you a greater appreciation for graffiti, or did it reinforce your view of it as a crime?

VS: I always default–I don't know if you saw the documentary style wars,

INTERVIEWER: Yeah,

VS: The detective in there, Bernie Jacobs, I happen to know him. And he says in that documentary "I'm not an art critic, I'm a cop". And I've always had that same kind of opinion–like I don't know what art is, I know what a crime is – If somebody commits a crime.

You know, I've come to the place where I don't think art is defined by the artist, it's not defined by society, it's not defined by anybody but the person viewing it. So you might look at something and say "wow that's really artistic" and I might go "what is that". I've realized the expression "beauty is in the eye of the beholder", I think art is in the eye of the beholder as well.

So my default has always been I know what a crime is. If michael angelo wouldn't have had permission to paint the sistine chapel–he's a vandal not an artist. That doesn't mean what he did isn't artistic, it just means–I mean look, everything is about permission. Did you have permission to do that? You did? Okay, moving on then.

I’m not gonna sit there and look at it and say oh yeah I like that or I get that. To be fair, there are graffiti artists that I actually like. I have canvases in my house–with art. I like the art form, but for me it’s really just about the permission aspect.

INTERVIEWER: Right

VS: Yeah, and I've had some really interesting conversations. One of the most interesting conversations I've ever had was with kind of a nemesis, we don't like each other but we tolerate each other because we travel in the same circles, and that's Ket. We were at a symposium over at the Red Bull space in Manhattan.

And he said that, well, you know, I believe that if it's in the public view, I have a right to do anything I want to it. At the time I was living in Brownstone in Bed-Stuy and I said so, Alan, let me just get this clear, you believe I live in this Brownstone. You believe that you can come to my Brownstone and spray paint the front of it because it's in public view. He goes yeah. And I said not my kitchen. He goes oh no, no, no. He goes what's inside the house is yours, but what’s outside because is in public view. And I thought to myself that is the craziest thing I've ever heard.

A couple of graffiti writers who I've become friendly with, we chatted about it afterwards because a bunch of them had come to this event and one of them said to me hey, he's Cuban. And I'm like okay, what does that mean? They said they don't have public or private property, they don't have “property” in Cuba.

He goes everything in the public space is the public's, so that's why he thinks that way, and I'm like, wow, and you know. So his experience was that, hey, I have a right to do this because it's in the public view. But it kind of made sense to me, like yeah, okay, I could see.

11:04

INTERVIEWER: Is there any reason why you choose to be a member of the vandal squad subsection of the NYPD as opposed to anything else?

VS: By accident. Honestly, honestly, by accident. I was with the transit police at the time. You know, we were taken over by the NYPD in 1995. But when I first became a police officer, I was with the transit police. There was a big push to get graffiti off the subway.

I happened to be driving a captain, And I went down, you know, to this meeting. I happened to drive him to this meeting he was going to. And by the way, I'm a train buff. Right? I love subway trains. I had model trains as a kid.

It was the greatest thing in the world, because I became a transit cop. You know? And, so he was going to a graffiti meeting, and I knew a lot about the subways. I knew about train yards.I know as a kid, I would go out probably in neighborhoods where I shouldn't have even been with a camera taking pictures.

And so I go to this meeting, and they're talking about, you know, trains being laid up in a particular area. And I said, “well, they don't lay trains up there anymore” The captain looked at me, not the not the captain that I was driving, but another one, and he said, “who are you”. I said “I’m driving [redacted]”. He says, “well then shut up” and I’m like okay. They start talking about something else and I go, * *cough* * *cough* *. He goes “what”. I say “they’re not laying trains up there anymore”. He goes “what do you know about graffiti?” I said” I don't know anything about graffiti”. So he said to me, he goes, “you know a lot about trains?” I said “Yeah” He said, “well, come back here tomorrow in civilian clothes, I got a job for you”.

I went down to the office the next day in civilian clothes. He said bring a notebook. So I brought an old book and a pen and he said I want you to go out on this subway line and I want you to write down all the graffiti tags that you see.

I wanted to impress this captain, so I went out and I'm sitting on the Brighton line, which is the Q and the B now, but at the time it was the D train, freezing my ass off. It was like mid-november and trains were going by.

14:58

INTERVIEWER: So did the vandal squad have a database at this point?

VS: At this point, no. I mean, look, it's just like. I'm considered pretty computer literate. But I was just the one who got forced into it.

16:55

INTERVIEWER: Was there anyone you wanted that you never caught?

VS: Probably I mean off the top of my head, I can't think, I mean if you give me a few minutes.

INTERVIEWER: I saw that you had mentioned JA a couple years back in an article, what about him?

VS: Yeah, probably he was one of the guys that was a little bit more than just a writer. He was robbing people of their paint and things like that. Most of the guys were nonviolent.

INTERVIEWER: So how did arresting a writer work? Was it you're showing up at their job, their house? Are you catching them in the act? How did that play out?

VS: Most of the time, catching them in the act, um, was the only way that it was done back then. You know, if you caught them in a train, in a subway tunnel or in a train yard, you know, and they weren't writing yet, we had trespass. If they had a bag of paint. We had, you know, possession of graffiti materials. If they were painting, we would charge them with criminal mischief and making graffiti.

But I would say almost 100% of it when I first started was based on catching people in the act and then, when the computer age started and we could do databases and we would take pictures of the graffiti, that's when we started to go to court and get designated as expert witnesses and you could go into court and say okay, on March 1st we arrested the guy for doing this. Here's the pictures. He was caught in the act and then six months later in August, whatever we get a call and his train was graffitied and the tags are exactly the same. You know we compare them Sometimes, you know I mean, you know it wasn't a slam dunk.

Sometimes the courts would be like nah, you know we're not going for that. But once you get designated as an expert, it kind of helps in the form, and that's when we were able to, you know, say, okay, this is the same guy. You have to have an understanding of the subculture as well. It's like how do you know somebody didn't go out do the same tag and you know, we would explain, okay, here's the deal.

27:10

INTERVIEWER: Desa was arrested in 1999, right? Or what year was he arrested? Were you one of the people that oversaw that?

VS: Yes, actually I was present for the one on Linden Boulevard at the Pitkin Yard and supervised probably just about all his arrests.

INTERVIEWER: So him getting arrested, how do you even prosecute someone who, I don't know, damn near painted the whole city? How do you go about that?

VS: So they prepared complaint reports for anywhere that they could identify the tag as being the same. Again, you know, it's one of those things you want everything to look the same.

They sent guys out, my guys, guys from different precincts. So each precinct has a graffiti coordinator. One of the most active ones, um, he's since passed. If you look at the newspaper article, I can't remember his last name for some reason the cop, but it was his first name and he's walking Desa out of the precinct.

A lot of what Desa did was in the 104 precinct, so a lot of the charges were based in the 104. But then when they started to add up all the tags that he had done and they went through all these cases and compared, you know, okay, this looks like this. The DA's office is like, okay, that one you can charge, nah, that one doesn't look the same, that one you can charge. And by the time they added it all up, they figured he had committed a million dollars worth of damage in the city.

INTERVIEWER: So that's how he got the name Million Dollar Vandal.

29:19

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever raid anybody's homes while you were doing vandal squad? What entails if you're gonna raid someone's home?

VS: If you're going to raid someone's home, you have to present the case to the DA's office. That says okay, these are, let's say, 10 cases where we've had graffiti written. You know, tags, trains spray painted, a wall spray painted, where we have a complainant. You know this person, he's been arrested twice for the same exact thing. Look at these pictures. Everything's the same. We know that he's gonna have you photographs, black books, spray paint. He's going to have what we refer to as burglar's tools, which is just about anything that you're not supposed to have.He's going to have what we refer to as burglar's tools, which is just about anything that you're not supposed to have. Like if you've got a New York City transit vest. You know. a reflective vest and one of those lights that you carry, and a helmet. That's all considered a burglar's tools. So you've got all this stuff you present.

37:22

INTERVIEWER: Right now, they're handing out a bunch of felonies, like serious, like long count felonies, and for the clean trains. But it seems like everyone's getting away with painting the street, what do you think?

VS: There's definitely more of a push in Subway and again you think about how graffiti makes people perceive something's unsafe. You've had a lot of high profile problems in the Subway in the last year or two. You've had high profile crimes. You've had people pushing you by the trains. Like I said, in the early 2000s, probably late 2005, early 2006, they didn't care about the subway anymore.

40:25

INTERVIEWER: What are your thoughts on prison as a response to graffiti? I feel like that's an ongoing argument. And as a follow-up, why do you think JA avoided prison while others, like Desa, did not?

VS: Prison for me, believe it or not, Is a last resort thing. I would hate for someone to go to jail over graffiti. Some guys just don't get it, and you can only hit people up for community service and restitution a certain amount of times before you're like this doesn't work.

I mean JA got arrested a number of times but he's got connections. It's a sad fact, but you know when the transit authority said well, you did $50,000 worth of damage over this, and your dad can write a check.

You know, the graffiti thing is like a cat and mouse game. Between the cops and the bad guys, I was just a cat for a while.

45:25

INTERVIEWER: Did you guys ever do any community outreach or do anything beyond just arrested people?

VS: That was one thing that doesn't get a whole lot of play because it doesn't fit the narrative of either the graffiti writers or the cops. But at one point had a very, very intricate like diversionary program where guys would have, you know, we'd get them into art programs or get them into different things. One particular guy, who we arrested back in the day, he wasn't a bad kid, you know some, some harm issues and whatnot, and I remember talking to him and him being like well, like well, yeah, I want to get a job in the industry. Like you know technology and blah, blah, blah. We got him into a program and he I can't give you his name because you'll understand why in a second, he's actually become one of the most proficient white hat hackers known to the industry.

Seriously, the guy works for, like the government, does work for major corporations. He's the white hat hacker that comes in and hacks into your system and then tells you okay, here's where your vulnerabilities are, and this is why.

In the beginning, we were like, okay, we're cops and we just arrest people. And then one of our chiefs was like, hey, I'd like you guys to do a lot of community outreach and a lot of diversionary stuff. And we're like, yeah, we don't like that because you're going to tell us we don't have enough arrests or enough of this. And so right around the time I left, that's one of the reasons I left, all of that stuff went out the window and all they kept asking us at the time was how many arrests did you make?

56:24

INTERVIEWER: I think I only have a few questions left, but I wanted to ask, what are your personal opinions on the current state of graffiti and the current state of Vandal Squad, what do you think?

VS: To me, they remind me a lot of times of, you know, when I first got on the job. I think that there's a lot more graffiti out there. I don't think that the police department is paying as much attention to it as they used to. It's kind of sad when you look at things that you worked hard with and you know you spend time on it and see what they've gone by the wayside.

I don't think that there's as much of a push from the police to prevent it. To me, it's just like I've never had a problem with, like I said, with permission, and I don't particularly think that painting a mural on the side of a building is a bad thing.

I think it's, I think it's, you know it's, it's, it's a part of the fabric of the city. You know, for me again, it goes back to the commission. I don't think the police department is paying as much attention to it, and I think that I just see a lot more throw-ups and tags than I used to.

1:05:24

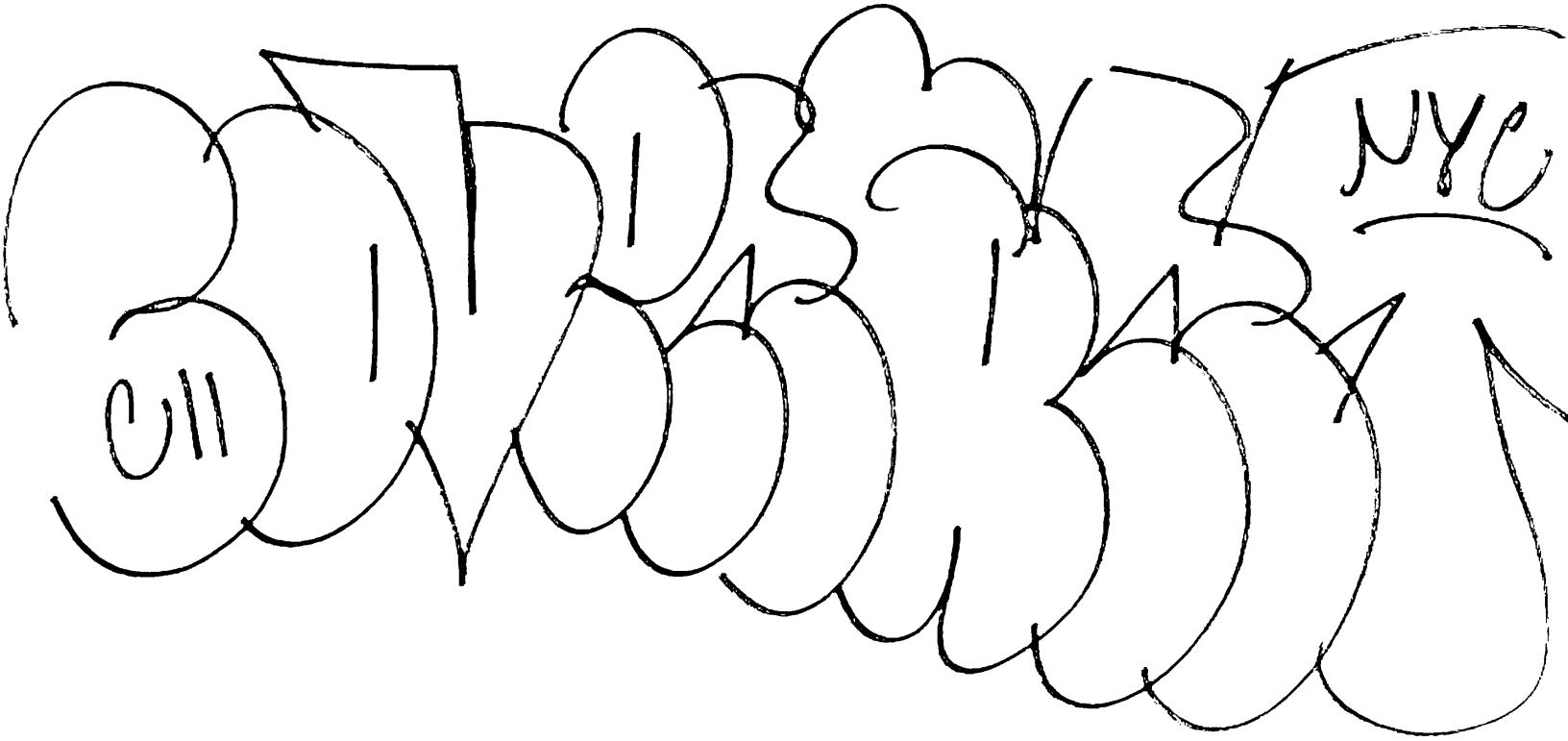
INTERVIEWER: I'm just realizing you were around for Sane's death. What was that like? That's a pretty significant moment in graffiti history.

VS: Oh, yeah, for sure Listen, I've had that incident. There was an incident in Manhattan where two guys from a crew in Bushwick got hit by a train. The story there is that they were being chased.

INTERVIEWER: Was that the story of the two dudes who were trying to go over JA?

VS: yep, wow, Sony and Slick were their tags. They knew the ins and outs of the subways and the dangers of it as well as any track worker or vandal squad guys, and these guys were hit by a

train in a no clearance area. It just didn't make sense to us at the time that they were in the no-clearance area because they're smarter than that.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think about Sane and the rumors surrounding his death? What do you think happened?

VS: Honestly, his particular death. I've never thought of it as anything but an accident, I don't know enough. Whereas the other one, I know that the police department, you know, called it an accident and that was the end of that, but I've always felt like that could have been something more interesting.